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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an integrated methodology adopted to help solve the problem of accessing boys' fleeting, mobile, and often unvoiced self-work during the process of constructing their gender identity. The study is part of a larger investigation examining the experience and education of boys and young men in relation to matters of sexual health and masculinity, which develops an understanding of the relationship between values, beliefs, and action. Following group interviews, six 15-year-old boys living in a large industrial English city were given disposable cameras and were asked to photograph anything that seemed important to them. The group of boys represented a variety of academic abilities, personality types, and ethnicities and were not from a pre-existing friendship group. Four of the six boys took photographs and were available for follow-up interviews. The photographs were then discussed in the group, and that stage of the research finished with one-to-one interviews. The paper explores in depth the positives and negatives of the methodology for evaluating personal growth, analyzes the photographs, and illustrates how the integrated methodology helped in understanding the individuals concerned and their relationships with the world they inhabit. (Contains 31 references.) (KB)

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Seen From Their Perspective: the disposable camera as a tool for research into adolescent boys' construction of gender identity

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Abstract

This paper reports on an integrated methodology adopted to help solve the problem of accessing boys' fleeting, mobile and often unvoiced self-work during the process of constructing their gender identity. Following group interviews, individual 15 year old boys were given disposable cameras and asked to photograph anything that seemed important to them. The photographs were then discussed in the group, and that stage of the research finished with one to one interviews. The paper explores in depth the positives and negatives of the methodology, analysing the photographs and illustrating how the integrated methodology helped in understanding the individuals concerned and their relationships with the world they inhabit.

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Seen From Their Perspective: the disposable camera as a tool for research into adolescent boys' construction of gender identity

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Background

Qualitative researchers have achieved some success when 'shadowing' adolescents into their lives; even being witness to forms of illegal activity eg. Patrick (1973), Dawes (1988). However, it is customary to 'see' these activities through the eyes of the researcher, written up in her words with illustrative quotes from respondents and, rarely, photographs of them. Even when photographs are used, the camera is usually operated by the researcher who chooses what to focus on, what to leave out, and when to press the shutter. (Prosser, forthcoming, gives a detailed exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.) This paper, however, follows an experiment in handing the camera, and hence more control for what is 'seen', over to the young person.

The Research

This paper reports on part of a three-year programme of projects, funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council, that investigate the experience and education of boys and young men in relation to matters of sexual health and masculinity, and develop an understanding of the relationship between values, beliefs and action. The key assumptions of the programme are that personal learning is experienced as a staged process (Richardson & Sheldon, 1990) involving observation, information processing, reflection, self-critique, reasoning, theorising about new ways of being - and is also a cognitively dynamic process (Kemmis et al, 1977), in which learners compare new knowledge with existing understandings and evaluate it for its 'fit' with the their needs and experience (von Glasersfeld, 1991). This constructivist approach to learning and development requires that we start with how young people

currently see the world and how their own theories respond to new information and experiences.

The programme is developing a conceptual model for understanding the formations of values and identity among young men. Our model shows movement *between* the peer group and the private worlds of boys. In the model, each is a separate context in which boys can develop and 'try out' ideas, measure the limits and possibilities of autonomy and independent thinking, and understand the balance of those aspects of his identity which are constructed socially and by personal volition (Walker and Kushner, 1999). The ideas and values being developed in these two contexts are continually set with and against those demonstrated by the wider society with which they come into contact e.g. families, teachers, police etc. I suggest that it is the interaction, crossing and re-crossing the liminal space between these peer, private, and societal worlds, that constitutes an 'engine' of learning and personal growth. This is shown in Figure 1, and the model will used in the analysis of the photographs later in this paper.

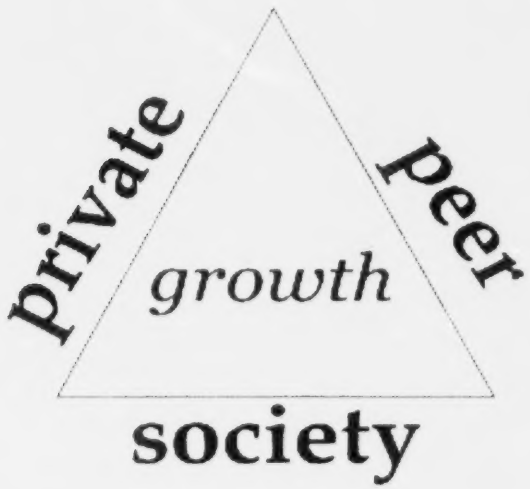

Figure 1: a conceptual model for learning and personal growth

The boys

The boys featured in this paper were aged between 15 and 16, and living in a large industrial English city. They were core members of a group I had interviewed three times before the cameras were introduced. We met at their school, a single-sex comprehensive with an ethnically mixed roll and a fairly low socio-economic catchment area. In all we met seven times at regular intervals over a two-year period. Originally the group consisted of six individuals who had been 'volunteered' by the deputy headteacher. The group covered a range

of academic abilities, personality types and ethnicities and, although they knew each other well, were not from a pre-existing friendship group. One of these individuals, of African Caribbean descent, left the school between the first and second interviews. Another, of Pakistani descent, was very quiet in the group and took no photographs. Of the four who did so, three were from a white and one from an Asian family background.

Methodology

The project was faced with a problem: our focus was the fleeting, mobile, and often unvoiced activity within the triangle formed by private, peer and societal actions and values. I needed to find methodologies sensitive enough to reveal clues to this activity, yet robust enough to minimise researcher bias.

Encouraged by Glick's (1974) argument that "cognition (...) is always an adaptive instrument, suited to the demands of an environment as seen by the subject", Worth's (1981) statement that "pictures provide for the articulation of existential rather than veridical events", and Schratz & Walker's (1995) contention that photographs can contribute to making visible the invisible, I provided five 15-year-old boys with disposable cameras and asked them to photograph whatever seemed important to them; something they could bring back and talk about. I did not make specific suggestions as to what the boys might photograph since I wanted to embed the data in the realities of young male culture, not in what I thought it might be. Disposable cameras were chosen since they have the advantage of being inexpensive and if any 'go missing', as in fact one did, there is no need for an investigation. They are also unobtrusive, can be used without fuss and, I hoped, would cause little disruption or comment.

Since the cameras were the most basic available, no attempt was made to train the boys in photographic technique or to educate them into aesthetic considerations. I wanted them to feel free to just 'point and click' as and when the fancy took them, thus avoiding the mediation involved in prior instruction for handling complicated equipment as engaged in by Turner (1992) and Worth (1997), or in team management as practised by Schratz & Steiner-Löffler (1998), and also avoiding the intrusiveness that more sophisticated equipment might engender. Although I could not offer the type of artistic/technical training that Hubbard and other professional photographers used with children in Washington DC (Ellsworth-Jones, 1991) which produced such striking images, I felt that such aesthetic considerations would negate the immediacy that I was after, and would also complicate analysis.

I was not sure how the idea would work, so to begin with I gave a camera to just one boy from the group – the one who had shown most interest so far in the research. I was also keen to have his explanations of the photograph. I felt that context was necessary and only he could give the valid one. As Berger (1982) puts it:

> *An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.* (Berger, 1982, p.89)

Since we were meeting next in a small group, I asked whether he was willing to talk about his photos in front of the group or whether he would prefer to talk to me privately. He was happy to explain them to the group and, as it turned out, they prompted interesting group discussions, moving the talk into topics which were obviously important for the boys but which may not have occurred to me to introduce. At the end of this group session, four other boys took away a camera and the process was repeated three more times. (The fifth boy took no photographs. I made sure he understood that he had the opportunity, and offered him a further camera if he needed it, but respected his privacy and did not press him.) A pattern was therefore set, for this study, of group discussion of the photographs. It might be interesting to see, should the opportunity arise in the future, whether an assurance that only the researcher would see the prints would result in different photographic subjects or styles.

Since I was keen for the boys to feel that they owned the photographs, I gave them two choices as to development costs. Either I could take away the camera, get the film developed and return the unopened packet to them. (Thus giving them the opportunity to 'vet' the prints before I saw them, but requiring their trust that I would not have looked at them first.) Or they could have the films developed themselves, and I would reimburse them. Each system was chosen by two of the boys. After discussing the photographs I retained the prints but offered the boys the negatives, an offer taken up by three of them.

The photographs

The four boys produced a total of 67 photographic prints. It is possible that the boys held back some of the prints from the research process. And certainly poor photographic technique, coupled with the cheapest possible equipment, meant that some photographs did not 'come out'. However, photos do not need to be sophisticated works of art in order to speak to a viewer or generate discussion. In fact it could be argued that a technically 'poor' photograph is easier to engage with and respond to. Most of us have taken amateurish snapshots in our time.

It was fascinating to see the differences between each boy's photos. In one set an interest in cars was apparent, in another the focus was football. One boy had used his camera to record a day out with friends, and the fourth had used his to illustrate his feelings about school. Already boys who had somehow been reduced by the school setting and its uniform into a homogenised group were becoming individuals. As Sontag notes:

> *(Photographs) depict an individual temperament, discovering itself through the camera's cropping of reality* (Sontag, 1978, p.122)

And in the most obvious way the photos each had taken were revealing of their personal concerns, aspirations and values. Sontag again:

> *(N)obody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world* (ibid. p.88)

Each photographer showed his prints to the group, explaining the stories behind them, and the entire group discussed them. These discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. The discussions served not only to 'triangulate' the boys' stories but, as stated earlier, prompted extended discussions. For instance:

(a) the photograph of a street corner opposite a pub (which he was too young to enter), and the photographer's story of himself and friends being moved on from the corner by police, led to stories of police harassment, the lack of social spaces and denial of rights of free association.

Figure 2: street corner opposite the pub

(b) a photograph of a bloodstain left by an injured man discovered by the photographer led to a discussion of the relative wisdom of 'good Samaritan' behaviour.

Figure 3: the bloodstain

(c) an Asian boy's photographs of members of the Pakistani national cricket team, met by chance on a day out, led to a discussion of role models and the importance of sport.

Figure 4: sunbathing cricketers

Analysis

As Berger reminds us:

> *Photography, unlike drawing, does not possess a language. The photographic image is produced instantaneously by the reflection of light; its figuration is* not *impregnated by experience or consciousness.* (Berger, 1982, p.95)

So since the photograph comes to us unmediated, 'raw', the task of analysis is a heavy one. How should we understand these 67 photographs? There is a question concerning the perception and interpretation of visual data:

> *The assumption is made that everyone sees the same things, that the world, as we know it through sight, hearing, touch, and ability to smell, is the same for all. This is not so.* (Knobler, 1980, p.12)

Knobler goes on to explain the process of perception:

> *The sensory input travels (from the eye) to the brain, where it is interpreted. The interpretation depends upon the past experience of the observer (...) This experience would include the accumulation of daily interactions with the environment in which the observer has lived, embracing geographical location, economic and political background, religious involvement, friends, and formal training acquired in schools. Past experience is not a static quantity or quality. It changes with time as the observer lives, reads, observes, and is taught (...) though there may be great similarities between the past experience of individuals within a common cultural environment, no two persons can ever have identical past experiences. Interpretation of the sensory input also involves factors other than past experience, including intelligence, as well as the emotional attitude of the moment and the intensity of concentration. Even the observer's physical state may color the input in one way or another.* (ibid pp.14/15)

In fact, the interpretation of these photographs can tell us much about the person making the interpretation. For instance, I was looking at them to see whether they supported or denied my theories of personal growth. Someone from an artistic background looks at them to judge each photographer's grasp of the aesthetic. They can also be 'read' as indicative of ethnic or moral attitudes. A young man only slightly older than the photographers thought that they were young, reasonably happy people (although he acknowledged some "sad" photos), interested in other people and with a sense of humour. Altogether, he thought, "a bunch of guys having fun with a camera. Not necessarily saying a lot about who they are." I do not consider these multiple 'readings' to be mutually exclusive, or any to be more valid than others. They merely serve to illustrate the richness of the photograph taken by a respondent as a research tool,

warning us not interpret too narrowly, and reminding us of inherent ambiguities. In this case the stories surrounding the photographs, together with the group discussions, serve as a check on my own over-interpretation of the images in isolation.

Coding systems for photographs do exist, for example that used by Musello (1980) who coded family album photographs by asking three questions:

1. What types of individuals were included in what types of photographs?

2. Where were the photographs taken? and

3. What themes or topics were included in the photographs?

In addition to the above, Damico (1985) coded the photographs in her study to indicate:

4. sex and race of those included

5. number of photographs which contained *no* people

6. eye contact or lack of it with the photographer

7. number of individuals in the photograph, and

8. whether the picture was posed or candid.

Based on the above, I was able to code the 67 photographs as follows:

41 contained people, of which 18 were posed and 23 were unposed. Two were of animals (though I was told that several more of family pets had not 'come out'). And 24 contained no people.

The 24 unpopulated images can be divided into domestic (9), school (6), leisure (6), abstract (2), and dramatic – the bloodstain (1).

Of the 18 that were posed, 6 could be seen to contain 'aspirational trophies', in three cases this was a car and the other three pictured girls who had been 'picked up' on the day of the photograph. Only two of the posed photographs were of people 'acting silly' – in both cases the same friend in a normal pose but with a 'two-finger' gesture prominent.

I was struck by the number of unposed, candid, shots of people. These typically focussed on one or two people (usually male – only two were of a girl) and were characterised by a relaxed, gentle feeling of friendship. The boys' stories about these photographs were macho, up-beat: a boy on a sofa cuddling his dog had been snapped because "he'd just been kissing his dog! His dog's his girlfriend". And a picture of one boy carefully dressing the hair of another had been taken because "we were going out to a club. We put this stuff on our hair – it looks

really cool under the lights. Gets you noticed (by the girls)." When questioned by the group as to why he had taken a gentle snap of the family dog looking in through a window (Figure 5) , the photographer replied with a story of how the dog "only a puppy" had been stolen and his own exploits involved in its recovery. For me these macho stories contrasted with the almost vulnerable quality of the images.

Figure 5: the family puppy

Looking at all 67 photographs, I was struck by what was missing. Family pets were represented but not a single family member. With the exception of the cricketers, all the individuals photographed were of the same peer group. (And even here, more often than not, members of the peer group had insinuated themselves into the 'cricketers' pictures.) Only 5 of the 67 photographs contained a girl and of these two were of a brother's girlfriend, and three were of the 'trophy girls' picked up on a day out.

It is possible that this reflects genuine priorities for them now. Taking the research programme as a whole, time and again, when asked about what is important to them, the boys I interviewed mentioned friends first. Older boys talk of girlfriends and family, and some younger boys from ethnic minority households placed their families as highest in importance, but it seems as if boys of around 15 are frequently trying to shake themselves clear of family influences, while not yet becoming seriously involved with the opposite sex. They are working out who they are with reference to their peers. My research concurs with the conclusions of Phoenix et al (1999) who state that boys' first concern is popularity. Harris (1998) goes so far as to state that peer relationships (and to a lesser extent genetics) are what influence the development of personality: parents, she argues, are of little or no consequence.

Learning about individuals through their photographs

Since the prime objective of the study was to learn more about each individual's world I will now discuss each boy's photographs in turn, reflecting on their fit with his own 'story' told during the interviews. It is, I discover, difficult to describe photographs without acknowledging one's own interpretation, so I have allowed my own to creep in. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to give more than 'thumbnail sketches' of the boys, referred to below by the pseudonyms they gave themselves at the beginning of the research process.

NB. Differing numbers of photographs from the boys reflect technical problems. Since the cameras were without a flash, those boys who took more photographs outdoors had a higher number of successful prints.

Popeye

Popeye is the most optimistic of the group. He lives with his mother, whom he loves "to bits" and his much younger sister. He has an older brother, now in the Army. He is confident, sociable and talkative.

Of his 19 prints, one was a view from a house window and two of the family puppy – the other 16 were peopled. Three photographs were of gymnasium activity, taken on a family visit to his brother on an Army 'open day'. 5 prints were of one or two boys 'mucking around' in domestic interiors. But the majority (6) featured a friend with his flashy red car.

Figure 6: the red car

This car is the focus of much devotion. Three of the prints showed the friend working on it (see Figure 6), and in two of them racing trophies appear on the

roof. No-one in Popeye's family owns a car, and he is as yet too young to drive, but this is his dream.

Two prints are of a girl, sitting head in hands and possibly reading. She turns out to be his brother's girlfriend. One print that had not come out had been of 'trophy girls' dressed up for Halloween. Although Popeye has had a girlfriend for some months, she does not appear in his photographs.

GB

GB is the middle child of 7, and overcrowding at home is affecting his schoolwork. He talks very little to his mother and stepfather, and dislikes his father. Leisure time is spent with friends on the street, often involving minor vandalism and trouble with the police. He has recently left his Saturday job in a local market because his boss, an Asian, was racially abusive – GB is white. In the interviews he is friendly and cheerful, not allowing his stammer to inhibit his comments.

GB had the lowest number of successful prints – 11 in all - which disappointed him and he did not wish to retain the negatives. He said that most of those which had not 'come out' contained family pets. The majority (8) of his photographs contained no people. 5 of these were of his school (see Figure 7) – four looking out through barred windows and one of bleak strip lighting. He had wanted to emphasise that school was a "prison".

Figure 7: school

There are no girls in the images, and GB is physically a late-developer. Of the total eleven, there is one 'friendly' snap of a boy sitting on a sofa holding a dog, plus one, which has not developed well, which may be of a couple of friends in a room. And there is one neutral image of a distant boy walking a dog in a park. The other eight read, to me, of alienation.

Uzi

Uzi's parents came to the UK from Pakistan. He lives with them and his older brother and sister. Neighbours include uncles, aunts and cousins.

Uzi had requested that he should have a camera in time for a school day out to an amusement park. He was delighted with his 23 prints, 19 of which were taken during that trip. Of the other four, two are of detached houses belonging to his family, one is of a large van belonging to his cousin, and one is a self-portrait.

Of the photos taken on the day out, six are of his friends. Three of these are taken with girls met that day: one is of a friend with his arm around his girl and two are of Uzi and a girl dressed in smart white clothes, their arms around each other as they pose for the camera. (Uzi is the only photographer to appear in any of the photos, and he does so four times.)

Uzi's intention had been to use the camera to record himself and friends on their day out. But the main reason why Uzi was so delighted with his photos was the chance meeting with the Pakistani national cricket team, in the UK for a tournament, who were also having a day out at the park. So Uzi has 8 photos of his heroes, mostly posing for his camera, and one of himself with two of them. One of his prints appears to buck the trend: it contains an Asian family picnicking on the grass (See Figure 8). One might be excused for thinking this proved the widely-held notion that Asian families are closer than whites (a notion paraded by the British Home Secretary during the week of writing – March 2000). However, this is a cricketer's family, with the hero-figure sitting in the middle of the group.

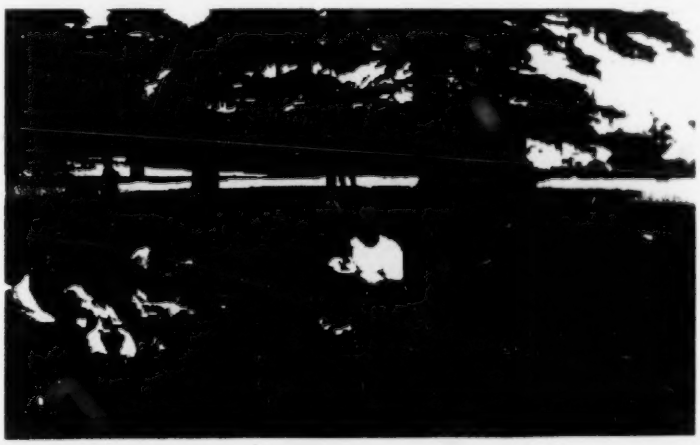

Figure 8: cricketer and family

No white face appears anywhere in Uzi's photographs, and his prints give the impression of a sociable young man firmly embedded in his Pakistani culture. However from the interviews it becomes clear that he is undergoing an identity crisis. He describes his relationship with his parents:

> *"It's like two totally different people, what I'm doing now and what they've done is totally different. What I do, for them I'm too westernised. I'm too westernised to be an Asian and what I'm trying to explain to them, I'm not born in Pakistan, I'm not from the Far East, I'm born in England. (. . .) I have British nationality and what's here, we can live by the laws here, so there's no point of me living by the laws from there, when I can live by the laws here. I've got British nationality (. . .) I'm proud to be Asian, it's just what they're, you see, when I have kids, there's* ***no way*** *I'm going to be like them. (. . .) To tell you the truth, I do feel sorry for myself. I sob sometimes.*

The photographs of himself with a girl are a clue to this – evidence of Westernised behaviour of which his parents would not approve.

Noel

Noel lives with his mother, father, older brother and younger sister.

He brought 14 prints, only three of which are peopled. Of these, one is of a friend in a 'tough' pose in a domestic interior, one is of another friend in a much gentler pose outside a house, and the third is two boys in a sitting room – one in a chair and the other vacuum cleaning (for which Noel gives a macho explanation: clearing up after a wild party).

The overall impression of the remaining 11 prints is grim. But a closer look, together with Noel's accompanying stories, can lend ambiguity to most of them. Two partial house exteriors look somewhat unfriendly, but one is Noel's house and one belongs to a friend's family. Rainy weather can make a view from a kitchen window appear bleak, but there is a barbecue stand in the garden and the windowsill is neat and clean. An image of blood on a pavement looks frightening, but Noel and his friends managed to get help for the man who shed it. Three photographs of an empty football pitch are taken from an unforgiving angle, but this is Noel's 'field of dreams'.

Figure 9: football pitch

It is more difficult to find positives about the remaining four. Two are of walls bearing unimaginative graffiti. One is of a pub that Noel and his friends are too young to enter. And the last is of a girls' school, sister establishment to his own, but the building is seen in the distance and behind high railings.

A final interview with Noel, made six months after the photographs were taken, confirms my pessimism. Noel is a young man who finds his surroundings physically threatening – so much so that he dares not be on the streets alone and takes a bus to a 'better' area to where he feels safer to "hang about" with friends. He is giving up hopes of professional work in football but has no idea of any alternative direction. He would like a girlfriend but doesn't know how to go about getting one, and regards the future with despair.

Discussion of the methodology

We live in a visually-literate society, yet as Prosser (1998) argues, images are undervalued in research where the emphasis is on the written word with other forms of evidence being considered of doubtful validity. He cites two drawbacks to the use of photography in research. One is *procedural reactivity* i.e. the intrusiveness of photographic equipment making the researcher more 'visible' and therefore inhibiting everyday behaviour. The second is *personal reactivity* i.e. the impact of the personal characteristics of the researcher on the findings complicated by their selection criteria plus technical and artistic judgements. But, as noted by McPake & Powney (1997), many disadvantages occur when it is the researcher who is taking the photographs. In this case, handing the camera over to the respondent appears to have overcome these particular problems.

Silverman (1993) gives three possible explanations for the research community's suspicion of visual evidence that I have summarised as:
1. Television has encouraged us to take what we can see for granted, hence we associate research with what we read (e.g. texts, statistics) or hear (e.g. interviews)
2. Images are difficult to transcribe.
3. Focussing on an image can shift attention from the processes involved in its production and reception.
I am not confident that this study can counter these arguments, except to wonder whether postmodern theory's stress on the dominance of the visual means that there is now something of a move in the direction of visual evidence.

With only four participants this was a very small study. Therefore the temptation to see Uzi's photographs as similar to those taken by the black male students in Damico's (1985) research, and thus extending into the Asian community her conclusions that black students are more people-focussed than whites, should be avoided. Likewise, I cannot counter her finding that white students are more likely to strike 'silly' poses for the camera than blacks. However the numerically small sample has allowed for discussions leading to deeper understanding of the photographs and their significance to individuals.

As discussed above, there can be problems with the analysis of photographs. Berger (1982) warns about their inherent ambiguity:

> *A photograph is a meeting place where the interests of the photographer, the photographed, the viewer and those who are using the photograph are often contradictory.* (Berger, 1982, p.7)

In this paper I have tried to take account of these layers of meaning, but the reader must judge how successfully.

To sum up, I have listed the positives and negative of the methodology as they relate to this particular study:

Positives:

• Gives a view of the interviewee's world that exists outside the frame of the interview.

• Prompts discussion of the interviewees' own concerns – the emergence of which, according to Glaser (1992), is a prerequisite of grounded theory analysis.

• Allows the researcher to demonstrate the degree of trust (s)he has in the young people.

• Photographs are here used **by** the boys, not used in evidence against them. Evening up, in a small way, the constant surveillance they feel they are under from multiple sources e.g. security cameras; teachers, "What're you doing wearing that shirt?" parents, "Where are you going?" neighbours "We were

playing football in the street and he called the cops," shop-keepers, "They always think you're going to nick something. Follow you round," police, "They see someone on the street, and they'll stop you."

• After discussing the photographs I went to the school for a final visit and talked to each boy individually. The knowledge their photographs had furnished of individual backgrounds and views of the world considerably eased these interviews, enabling me to maximise the time available.

Negatives:

• With hindsight it would be better to ensure that the cameras were sophisticated enough to contain an automatic flash. This lack resulted in several photographs not 'coming out', which was disappointing for the boys. (In later discussions I asked them to describe the ones they remembered taking that did not appear in the processed packet, and none of them seemed to vary in subject from the others. However, it is impossible to quantify any difference the presence of these missing prints might have made.) In any case, even the simplest technology is subject to other 'controls', such as focus and chance.

• Although I tried not to influence the boys' photography it would be naive to assume that the entire process was 'researcher free'. The boys would have been aware of the research process when taking their photographs, even though they may also (and in Uzi's case certainly did) have a personal motivation. The researcher would still have been in view; though whether as impartial audience, critic, evaluator or confidant is difficult to ascertain. And as well as informing, the photographs may have been taken to be entertaining, mystifying, fooling or shocking.

• As Prosser (1995) notes, 'photography and ethics are not good 'bedfellows''. Photographs of people are never neutral. Have those people portrayed in the photographs given their permission? What ethical undertakings, if any, did the photographer give them? Did they have any idea of the manner in which their images might be used?

This highlights what I consider to be the biggest weakness of image-based research – the question of anonymisation. Much qualitative research is done under the safeguard that the researcher will anonymise data so that it cannot be traced back to the informant. With a photograph this is impossible to guarantee. Once portrayed in any research, an individual becomes part of the public domain, and this can bring about unforeseen consequences. Rob Walker (1999) illustrates this with the story of a child who was photographed as part of an ethnography of an Australian school. The photograph was used, with the school's permission, on the cover page of some of the university's course material. Unknown to the research team, mother and child had previously moved to escape an abusive father who by chance was one of the students on the course. He was able to trace the child from the photograph, and the abuse began again.

Mindful of that story, I have carefully chosen anonymous, I hope, images to be reproduced in this paper. But having to make such a careful choice is limiting – there are other photographs which would have better illustrated my argument.

Conclusion

In general, the disposable camera appears to be to be a successful way of accessing respondents' own concerns and values while also encouraging enlightening group discussions concerning them. The added value of the methodology is its potential for opening up people's lives – either for their own use, or that of the researcher. The photos generated life stories; not just showing how things 'are', but also pointing to their hopes, dreams and fears. There is richness and complexity here but also, inevitably and as in life, ambiguity.

It is necessary, however, to use this technique as part of a holistic, integrated methodology. This group had been interviewed three times before the cameras were given out. There were four group interviews afterwards, each given over to the discussion of one boy's photos. And finally there were one to one interviews.

Photographs can be powerful in many – sometimes unforeseen – ways. The whole process needs sensitive handling, and there remain ethical problems concerning anonymisation.

For the purposes of the main research programme, these photographs provided useful evidence to support our theoretical model:

Peer
The absence of families, adults in general (with the exception of the cricketing heroes), and the scarcity of girls, reinforces assertions that their male friends are of primary importance. Relatively few images of friends are posed or macho. There are an equal number showing friends (usually singly) in a vulnerable, almost tender, light – indicating that the world of young male friendship is much more subtle than is often supposed. Real learning about the self can exist in this context, though the macho explanations given to the group about these tender images are significant. The macho stories that boys tell to each other can influence the impression they make in the wider world, exacerbating the tendency of the media and adults in general to think the worst of them. Perhaps this is a case of words speaking louder than actions.

Private
Shots of interiors (sometimes juxtaposed with exteriors) appear to give clues to inner lives: domestic surroundings, the choice of posters for a bedroom wall, free weights stacked under a window. Are the bleak views of exteriors telling? Or is this just a technical limitation? The 'aspirational' images of cars, girls and (possibly) houses, give indications of value systems – as do their lack in two of the boys' photos. However it was 1:1 interviews, as well as the photographs

themselves, that shone light on the inner conversations a boy has with himself as he works out how he feels he should be in the world. And perhaps some aspects of private life are just too delicate for this age-group to pin down photographically: for instance Popeye's relationship with his girlfriend which was not reflected in his photographs, and therefore not laid open to the risk of discussion with the group. Her existence, and his feelings concerning her, only appeared in the final one to one interview.

Society
This is represented in the photographs by the number of barriers present. Sometimes overtly, in the case of bars on school windows, sometimes less obviously in the guise of fences, walls, kerbstones, white lines on sports pitches. Authority is ubiquitous, constantly telling these boys where they may go, where they may not go. It has a physical, structural dimension, controlling their lives. Here, it was group discussion of the images that illustrated the restrictions these boys feel are placed upon them by society, and the consequent social exclusion and powerlessness they feel they suffer.

Looking again at all the photographs, the impression I gained was of thoughtful young people, capable of great gentleness, struggling in a world that often appeared to be hostile. The peer group is of vital importance to counter the social exclusion they feel is imposed upon them by the adult world, but the peer group can have its own tyranny, sometimes necessitating the adoption of macho behaviour and language. There was a striking difference between the gentle images and the macho stories the boys told each other about them. For me, this exemplified the movement within the space inside the private/peer/society triangle that these boys undertake in order to build their masculine identities.

These conclusions are mine. I have not had the opportunity to share them with the boys. I wonder what they would say?

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